By Rona Jaffe

["Rona Jaffe's Mazes and Monsters," a two-hour TV-movie based on Jaffe's recent best seller, is scheduled to be seen on CBS Dec. 28 at 9 P.M. (ET). Here the author describes what was involved in transferring the novel to film.—Ed.]

Because the cafeteria looked like Westminster Abbey and the actress started changing her lines...

...it's no wonder the best-selling author-turned-producer of 'Rona Jaffe's Mazes and Monsters' had to spend 14 hours a day worrying

What ended with my presence on the set of "Mazes and Monsters" began with my discovery of the popularity of fantasy games among young people, and the seriousness with which they are taken.

To anyone who has never heard of them before, these games—one of the most popular is called "Dungeons & Dragons"—seem very bizarre indeed. Usually played with nothing more than a vivid imagination, dice, pencils, graph paper and an instruction manual, they are generally war games with a medieval background in which each person creates a character complete with personality, weapons, spells and powers. The characters are plunged into adventure in a series of mazes run by another player, the omnipotent referee, who creates monsters, and other frightful dangers, to destroy the players. The point of the game is to amass a fortune and keep from being killed.

After reading a newspaper story about a college student who was thought to have disappeared while acting out a game of "Dungeons & Dragons," I discovered that some people were taking these games into real environments—steam tunnels, caves, forests—and playing them partly for real. What happens when a strong fantasy is taken a step too far? I began to wonder. By the time I learned that the mysterious disappearance of that college student had nothing to do with his game-playing, I had already gathered enough material to create my own game, "Mazes and Monsters," and had written a novel about the young people who are making the '80s the decade of fantasy games.

My novel involves four bright, attractive college students who live normal lives by day, but at night create a terrifying, secret fantasy world that results in disaster for one of them. Now, on location in Toronto, I find myself hoping that acting out my own secret fantasy—being in show biz, an associate producer for the first time—will not end in disaster for me.

For the four friends in "Mazes and Monsters" I wanted experienced young actors who were not household names, in order to give the story a sense of reality. We had to cast the key part of Jay Jay—the brilliant, eccentric, 16-year-old college sophomore whose best friend is his mynah bird—first. For him, we needed an actor who could portray vulnerability. In a novel you can tell the audience what a character is thinking, but in a movie you have to show it. Also, the actor had to be short so that he would look younger than his friends. Our search led us to Chris Makepeace ("My Bodyguard," "Meatballs"), who was perfect except for his height—5-feet-9. We decided to cast the other parts with taller actors to make him look short. David Wallace was cast as Daniel, the campus superstud; Tom Hanks (*Bosom Buddies*) became Robbie, the one with the guilty secret; and our Canadian discovery, Wendy Crewson, was chosen to play Kate, the girl they all love.

Day One. At 5:30 A.M. my alarm clock shatters the darkness, for the first of what will seem an endless procession of 14-hour days spent hovering over details.

An abandoned mental hospital (rather apt, I think) has been transformed into my literary invention: Grant University's Hollis East dormitory. Meanwhile, at the studio, carpenters are working day and night to create my caves, complete with pools, a waterfall, stalactites, stalagmites, cobwebs and bats. A person could really get lost in them, especially since the walls are movable to allow the camera access to shoot different angles. An artist arrives with sketches of the board and miniatures for my game of "Mazes and Monsters" to see if it's as I envisioned it. Unnerved by all this responsibility, I devour a pound of grapes.

Kate (Wendy Crewson), suited up to play the game, prepares to enter the caves.

Usually you shoot easy scenes the first day because the actors are nervous and don't know each other, but we are doing a hard one: the scene in which Jay Jay introduces himself to Robbie in the cafeteria. The actors haven't had time for a real rehearsal. I hate the cafeteria because it's too nice; I want a real-looking, crummy one. The next evening we go to the dailies (where you see what was filmed the previous day). Makepeace is stiff, Hanks is tense, the cafeteria looks like Westminster Abbey. Luckily, the film is out of focus; it will all have to be reshot.

Day Five. Movie making is a crash course in togetherness, and the four "friends" are already behaving as if they've known each other for years. This is showing in the acting. I feel better.

Day Six. My parents, who have never been on a movie set before, come to see the filming. They stumble through a maze of equipment to watch a scene in which Tom Hanks does nothing but sleep. After the scene is over, my mother goes to Hanks and says: "Good acting. Good scene." Then they ask me if they can leave.

Day Eight. Wendy Crewson has been changing her lines, taking out important ones. After 9000 rewrites, this is all we need. The executive producer, Tom McDermott, and I take turns watching her like a hawk.

Day 14. Today we are reshooting the difficult cafeteria scene. By now the actors are completely into their characters, clowning around, telling private jokes. Makepeace sails through the scene, and he and Hanks bounce off each other just as they should. Even the cafeteria—shot from a closer angle—looks good. I am enormously relieved.

Day 20. We are now in New York, where, in spite of the crowds we attract, the last scheduled scene is shot. It's time for the actors to say goodbye.

In four weeks we went from strangers to family, and now the only thing left of that warm, magical relationship is on film. Although I find that concentrated rush of emotion followed by swift parting strange, I suppose it isn't much stranger than writing a book. (END)

Rona Jaffe's first novel was the 1958 best-seller-turned-movie "The Best of Everything."